

Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen. (1Jn 5:21)

Today I am going to talk a little bit about the cross. I'm drawn to this discussion as watch Christianity become more and more a perverse mockery of what it should be. There is perhaps no more recognizable a symbol in all the world as that of the cross. If you were in marketing and managing a logo with the kind of recognition the cross supposedly is for Christianity, you'd be at the top of your game. The use of the cross as supposedly a symbol denoting a person or place's tie to Christianity is nearly universal in its recognition.

As I've talked to a few folks about this topic, the question of "why" came up several times. Am I concerned that people are going to suggest we put a cross up in the church building, or that people are going to suddenly start wearing them? Isn't our position on the cross being an idol pretty clear? Good questions all. Put simply, no, I am not imminently concerned that there is a move to add a cross to our church house.

I am concerned that we have a crystal clear, Bible-based definition of what Christianity is and that we adhere to it. The deception of the world by our adversary is a long, incredibly complex deception. It has many layers and machinations. Remember and take very seriously this verse

"For false Christs and false prophets shall rise, and shall shew signs and wonders, to seduce, if it were possible, even the elect." (Mar 13:22)

The only reason the elect can't be seduced is because God's mercy will make it so. Our faith isn't enough, our understanding isn't enough, our desire and zeal to serve the King isn't enough. This isn't something to take lightly, my dear friends. This is something to contemplate, meditate upon and ask God's help with routinely, so that we may be in that group who isn't seduced. As things progress more and more aggressively to quash God's true religion with a bad parody of that blessed religion, this clarity will be imperative.

However, simply having clarity isn't enough. We have to **represent** the truth. We are ambassadors of the King. That has to mean something.

"Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." (2Co 5:20)

Ambassadors don't set policy, they communicate it. They carry messages and actively, vociferously represent the interests of their sovereign. They don't get to decide what the message is that they are delivering, and they are accountable to their leader to defend the position that they are given. They don't get to negotiate from a personal position or decide to add or subtract from their sovereign's positions based on what they think is happening "on the ground".

I'll say it again, ambassadors represent the interests, will and policy of their leader to the leaders of the country they have been sent. As a nation-state, you don't need ambassadors in your own country. Ambassadors are sent into a foreign land, one that is at times hostile to the interests of their home nation, and hostile to them. Until their sovereign recalls them, however, the job goes on. All of which flies in the face of these calls for "Christian Nationalism" that has been in the news the last couple of weeks.

What fires me up about these matters is that all over this country, indeed all over the world, there are groups of people who claim to be His ambassadors, people who have the same instructions, the same messages preserved for them who are clearly not representing any of it. They add, subtract and just make things up out of their fleshly desires claiming they are the messages and interests of **our** King! This is great subterfuge and requires vigilance not to fall for it. This isn't a new thing, and it didn't take centuries for it to happen, either. We know, based on the words of both Paul and Peter, that there were in those first churches enemies of the King making their way into bodies of believers and leading people away from the truth they'd been taught

"But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction."
(2Pe 2:1)

If there were false prophets in Israel, the chosen nation and people of God – who had the Shekinah, the ark, the temple – should it be any real surprise that false teachers would make their way into the sheepfolds of Christ? Of course not.

So this requires vigilance and diligence to not assume we're so strong and so faithful, with such a deep understanding of our King's will that we cannot be deceived or drawn into these subterfuges and betray our King. Is there a church at Corinth, a church at Ephesus, a church at Rome, a church at Jerusalem, a church at Thessalonica, a church at Sardis, a church at Smyrna, a church at Pergamos, a church at Colosse, a church at Antioch, a church at Thyatira, a church at Philadelphia, a church at Philippi, a church at Laodicea? A church at Indianapolis? Not that we know of, but there were.

I list all those churches not to be cumbersome but to make this point. Will there be a church at Topeka when our Master returns? That is the question that should occupy at least **some** space in your meditations and prayers. Not all the space, but some. Without vigilance against these false teachers there will not. I am pressed in this matter many days when I see *so many* who claim to be His ambassadors saying things that are clearly not His words, I say I am pressed to understand how that has come to be and the terrifying prospect that we would do something against the interests of our King, becoming rogue ambassadors.

Of course, the Apostles give us those warnings about false teachers working their way in with subtlety, *from the very first days of the church*

“And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.” (Gal 2:4-5)

I want to stress this point. This wasn't 200 years after Christ ascended. This was happening *in the first churches assembled and organized, under the guidance of the Apostles*. There is nothing spectacular about those early churches that should cause us to afford them veneration or stress trying to find out the details of their operation and copy them. They were just as subject to man's fallibility as we are. Indeed, perhaps we should be all the more cautious in how we view ourselves given we don't have the Apostles guiding us with their direct learnings. We should be suspect of our attitude and circumspect in how we view our obedience and faithfulness.

I think we can also consider this event for enlightenment on how idolatry can creep in

“Now it came to pass in the third year of Hoshea son of Elah king of Israel, that Hezekiah the son of Ahaz king of Judah began to reign. Twenty and five years old was he when he began to reign; and he reigned twenty and nine years in Jerusalem. His mother's name also was Abi, the daughter of Zachariah. And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that David his father did. He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan.” (2Ki 18:1-4)

It isn't completely clear how it came to be that the brazen serpent became this idol, but I like Matthew Henry's analysis:

“The brazen serpent was originally of divine institution, and yet, because it had been abused to idolatry, he broke it to pieces. The children of Israel had brought that with them to Canaan; where they set it up we are not told, but, it seems, it had been carefully preserved, as a memorial of God's goodness to their fathers in the wilderness and a traditional evidence of the truth of that story, Num 21:9, for the encouragement of the sick to apply to God for a cure and of penitent sinners to apply to him for mercy. But in process of time, when they began to worship the creature more than the Creator, those that would not worship images borrowed from the heathen, as some of their neighbours did, were drawn in by the tempter to burn incense to the brazen serpent, because that was made by order from God himself and had been an instrument of good to them. But Hezekiah, in his pious zeal for God's honour, not only forbade the people to

worship it, but, that it might never be so abused any more, he showed the people that it was Nehushtan, nothing else but a piece of brass, and that therefore it was an idle wicked thing to burn incense to it; he then broke it to pieces, that is, as bishop Patrick expounds it, ground it to powder, which he scattered in the air, that no fragment of it might remain. If any think that the just honour of the brazen serpent was hereby diminished they will find it abundantly made up again, Joh 3:14, where our Saviour makes it a type of himself. Good things, when idolized, are better parted with than kept.

False teaching took an object which in a moment had significance and focused on the object instead of the event surrounding it. The brazen serpent had no special properties, as Hezekiah's calling it "Nehushtan" or "brass" shows us. This calling it Nehushtan was a derogatory thing. It's as if he's saying "it's **brass, people** not a thing to venerate or look at with big doe-eyed adoration." You take the mighty act God performed in the wilderness healing His faithful and combine it with the human tendency to commemorate and memorialize the past and you end up with people burning incense to this brass symbol asking it to heal them, worst case, best case claiming to use it to "focus their prayers to God for healing". Because, somehow, He can't hear the prayers if you're not looking at this thing made by men's hands. He has no power unless you look at it.

And that brings us to consideration of the cross. The cross is not a symbol of Christianity. **There are no symbols of Christianity.** Search the Scriptures. At no time did Christ tell us "show yourself to be my follower with this symbol". What Christ did tell us would identify us as Christians is this:

"By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (Joh 13:35)

We've looked at this passage many times and time constrains me, so I won't dig into this too deeply here, but suffice it to say that our actions, not our accoutrement mark us as His followers, and focusing on **those actions** is where our time should be spent.

Wearing a cross, having one on display in the church or in your home, or anywhere really, is not a Christian action.

I've heard a lot of things from people about the cross and making an argument that there is no idolatry involved. Things like:

- they don't worship or pray **to** the cross, that is they don't say "Cross, please help me" so it's not an idol;
- it is a simple reminder for them that Jesus died
- the cross is the symbol of Christian worship, and since they're wearing it not bowing to it, it's not an idol.

- People have told me that when they take it out of their shirt and kiss it, they're expressing their love for Jesus, not committing idolatry, and since they say it, that makes it true, since I can't know in their heart if they're worshiping the cross.
- I've seen arguments that since the cross was used in religious and secular ways prior to Christianity, it isn't possibly a Christian idol. Indeed, a little historical research shows it was used in different periods of Egypt, Babylon and other religions and systems of worship as an idol – what makes Christianity different?
- I had a Lutheran minister tell me that Jesus wasn't crucified on an actual 'T' shaped cross, that the Romans used a stake most of the time, which is what the word translated 'cross' actually means, so using a cross isn't idolatry because it's not an actual replica, it's just a tool of focus.

As an aside, technically the Lutheran preacher may be right, there is no direct evidence Christ's cross was an actual 'T', and the Romans had many different forms of crucifixion, so it could have been a simple post, it could have been an 'X' shape, it could have been the 'T'. It could have been done literally on a tree. That's part of the point – we don't know, and where we aren't given detail don't make assumptions, and don't then turn that assumption into something you call 'holy'.

Regardless, it's all sophistry. This commandment still holds as a commandment of our King:

*“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, **or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath**, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;” (Exo 20:4-5)*

The phrase “in the earth beneath” doesn't mean just things created by God, but things made by men's hands as well. No likeness of **any thing**. There is no exception carved out for “focus objects”.

No idols, and you want to be very, very careful about this. We tend to focus a lot on making idols out of your kids, your job, your car, your whatever. That's good, that's something to definitely focus on. Here you have the proclaimed ambassadors of Christ all over the world making the object used to kill Him into an idol and we're what, supposed to keep quiet about it?

Take a look at these pictures to see that I'm not just making a mountain out of a mole hill. Hopefully you can see that every one of these places calling themselves ambassadors of Christ have this idol in their midst.



Topeka Baptist Church



Southwest Baptist Church



St. John's Lutheran



Topeka Bible Church (obviously)



Fellowship Bible Church



St. David's Episcopal Church



Antioch Baptist



First Methodist

This is everywhere and done by people who claim **we're** not Christian because we talk about the whole counsel of God and all His attributes! We definitely should have an answer to those who would usurp our ambassadorship, not because we've had our hackles raised over it, but because it insults and abuses the truth of our King! We need a sign that says "Christians have no idols" with a cross and maybe a US flag with

buster signs over them. This is a big deal to these people who come up to us everywhere saying “I’m a Christian”. They think that by wearing this cross and having it in their churches and homes they’re doing something special.

They’re not, and don’t think for one second we can’t be sucked into this kind of sin.

Even the most well-intentioned ones focus on the thing, not the thing that was done! They aren’t focused on Christ, but the object of His murder. If he had been shot through by an arrow, would they walk around with an arrow necklace? Or an axe if he’d been beheaded? A rock if he’d been stoned? It makes no sense to focus on the object not the act! The **cross** doesn’t save, **CHRIST SAVES!** He had to be hung on a tree to fulfill the prophecies about Him and to complete the rejection of Him by the Jews. They hung Him on the tree like they would the worst of their malefactors

“And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree: His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged is accursed of God;) that thy land be not defiled, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.” (Deu 21:22-23)

It wasn’t enough to just have Him killed – and the Romans had other means of execution available to them, they didn’t HAVE to crucify Christ – but the Jews cried out to have Him crucified (Mar 15:13). Under Mosaic law, those guilty of capital crimes were stoned, but those who were the most heinous were hung on a tree as an example **after** being stoned, a deterrent against their abhorrent sin. Christ was such a fiend to the Jews, who were so full of their self-righteousness they saw no need for His salvific blood, He needed to be hung up to serve as a grand example!

Of course, Paul speaks to preaching the cross. But that doesn’t mean, like I’ve had preachers say to me, that if you don’t HAVE a cross, you can’t PREACH the cross. What folly! Preaching the cross is about preaching the necessity of His death to pay the price for His people’s sins! It is about preaching what Christ SAID about the cross

“And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.” (Luk 9:23)

“And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me.” (Mat 10:38)

If you’re not taking up a cross – metaphorically, because we’ve had weirdos who carry around a big physical cross and call that “preaching the cross” – then you’re not following Him. He said so! You’ve got to preach THAT! Not this maudlin, “accept Him and He’ll solve all your problems” pablum getting passed around in these so-called churches. Taking up the cross doesn’t mean wearing one (I’ve actually had someone

say that to me, that they take up their cross daily when they take it out of their jewelry box and put it around their neck), it doesn't mean looking at it hanging on your wall like a google-eyed minion with a little tear in the corner of your eye – it means pick it up and travel that path of silent endurance, bearing the worldly shame that comes with keeping His commandments.

In all the references to the cross in Scripture, at no point does it command, suggest or infer that the object of the cross is a thing to be considered as more than an object accomplishing God's end. When Paul speaks about "glorying in the cross" (Gal 6:14) he most certainly does not mean glorying in a diamond-studded 24 karat gold piece of jewelry. He is speaking to the result of Christ's crucifixion, that is, the redemption of His people.

The focus is on Christ – what happened to Him on the cross, why it happened to Him and what the result of that is. In **that** we glory. Consider that He is no longer on the cross! He lives! That is our primary focus! He accomplished what He set out to do. The cross was the means by which He paid the price, but why would we draw our eyes to that object of human cruelty? What we want to be focused on is the future state we hope to attain to, which is not on the cross, but at His right hand!

I say all these things to you to draw a line in the sand for us. A line that you can argue has been here a long time but renewing that line I think is important at this hour. Getting back to the fundamental roots and causing our young people to understand these are not "traditions". We don't believe these things just because we always have, or just because the old people say so. These things we believe are alive today in the Word.

"To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." (Isa 8:20)

In the hours that come, there will increasingly be those claiming to be Christian who speak not according to this word, and we must be able to make those distinctions. We must be good and proper ambassadors that adhere firmly to that sure Word and bring it to the forefront in all we say and do. To those who hear this, I say "Come, go with us, this way is good". Get here, or get to an assembly closer to you that speaks according to this word without dilution, without compromise, and takes up their cross daily, and don't just spend their time looking at one.

"Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." (Heb 13:20-21)